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Inclusive Schools: the power in our hands

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Abstract

Representing the great challenge of the educational systems, the inclusive school must be our aim for the next millennium. Is this a consensual goal? If so, how do we conceptualise an inclusive school and how can we work for it with the resources we have and manage to develop?

The present work is a result of an action-research study that started by the enquiry (from June/99 to September/99) to the people responsible for management of all the schools (more precisely 526, from the preschool level to the third cycle - end of compulsory education in Portugal) of the region of Alentejo, (Baixo Alentejo e Alentejo Litoral) and the intervention (planned for February/2000) with a group of teachers based upon the creative resolution of their school problems, towards the building of a school for all, where children, teachers, parents and other agents of the community find a place to grow personally and professionally.

1- Introductory aspects

In 1998, we started to work on the project: "Inclusive Schools: contribution for its implementation" which concentrated particularly upon in-service teacher training (30 hours' programme) to disseminate UNESCO materials (Teacher Education Resource Pack: special needs in the classroom) in order to make teachers more aware of the need to construct inclusive schools and their role in the whole process.

Initially we thought we should continue this type of work, but, influenced both by the evaluation of the UNESCO Project in Portugal made by Mel Ainscow (Foz do Arelho, November/98) and by our opinion about the importance of school-based in-service training as a probably more efficient way to introduce changes in schools, it was decided to follow this line within an action research approach, having in mind not only the need for personal and professional development of teachers but also their school's organization as a whole. So, this process began in 1999, by an enquiry made to direction boards of all the schools (526 from pre-school to 3rd cycle) of the region Alentejo (Baixo Alentejo and Alentejo Litoral (1)) in order to understand:

- the meaning attributed to the concept of Inclusive School;
- the conditions developed in those particular schools for that aim;
- the difficulties that had been faced;
- the interest in participating in a project of teacher training based upon school problems in a cooperative basis with the Teacher Training School of Beja.

In this article we try to describe some of the most important aspects of the research and action we have been developing.

2- Methodology

As we said before, action research is the approach we followed, since for its characteristics it was undoubtedly the most adequate model for the purposes defined, i.e., to act upon a certain context, based on research, reflection upon it and action with the involvement of the agents of that concrete scene.

Since we would like to have a representative sample of the entire universe of schools of this region, we used a questionnaire, with closed and open questions, contemplating the following areas of analysis:

Institutional identification (type of school; organizational model; number of students and number of pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN); number of teachers and other professional staff...);

Conceptualization of Inclusion (knowledge of legislation; educational measures undertaken and their efficiency as well as the most difficult barriers to overcome; role of management and interest in the project).

A pre-test was not made, but we submitted this instrument to the opinion of specialist teachers in Education (a group of colleagues in our school). The table shows the number of schools which were sent the questionnaire as well as the number of schools which answered it.

Table 1 - Schools of the Region

Type of school	Number sent	Percentage answered
Pre-school (1)	131	16.79
1st Cycle (2)	320	10
2nd and 3rd Cycles (3)	33	30.3
EBM (4)	42	16.63
Total	526	13.5

We expected a greater response, but most probably the time we sent the questionnaire (July to be returned in September/99), the number of questionnaires which schools are usually required to answer, and the little interest or knowledge about inclusion may be some of the explanations for this fact.

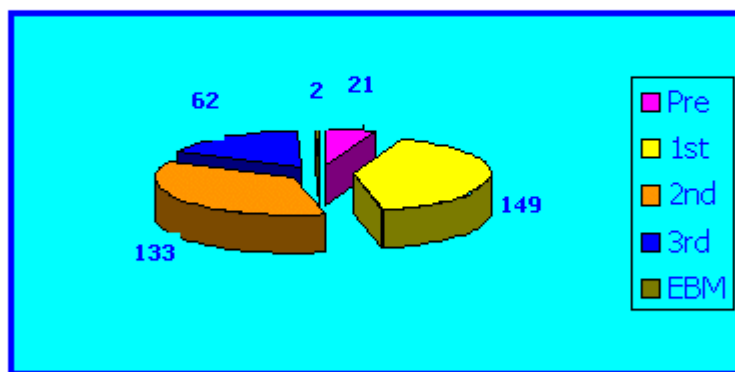
3- Analysis of the data collected: main aspects

Table 2 - General Picture of the Schools

	Pre	1st	2nd	3rd	EBM	Total
Pupils	931	577	1511	2649	89	5757
Teachers	58	88		613 (*)	14	773
Other Staff	43	23		135 (*)	3	204

(*) - This number includes 2nd cycle

Figure 1 – Pupils with Special Educational Needs



If one pays attention to the data, it is visible that a greater percentage of SEN pupils belong to 1st and 2nd cycles. This is not a surprise, since the more academic curriculum, starting at 1st level with the formal teaching of basic skills: reading, writing, counting and the traditional methods used become an obstacle for many children.

But the situation tends to be more serious now at the 2nd and 3rd level, considering the most recent laws on the evaluation of compulsory education, which permits a child to progress within his age group, even if he does not read or write. This is something many of these teachers do not understand and have difficulty to cope with.

Causes attributed to Special Educational Needs

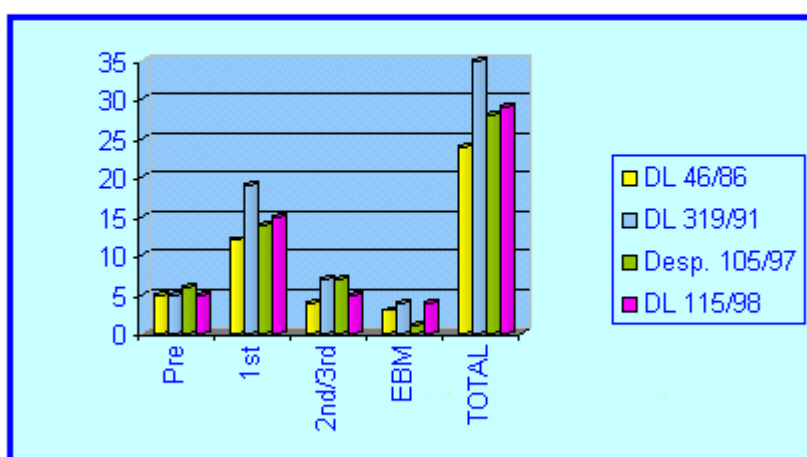
The causes attributed to the special educational needs are either: external to the child, specially located on the family and social-economic conditions and internal causes due to intellectual difficulties, emotional disturbance, lack of interest and study.

Table 3- Concept of Inclusive School

		Pre	1st	2nd/3rd	EBM
School for all	Promotes acceptance	77.8%	69.6%	37.5%	30.0%
	Improves educational quality/diversity	22.2%	15.2%	50.0%	50.0%
	Owns resources		6.5%	6.3%	10.0%
			8.7%	6.3%	10.0%

As we can see, most of the schools consider that an Inclusive School is a school where all are accepted, independently of limitations and differences. However, it seems to be evident that that representation of such a school is closer of the ideal concept at pre-school and 1st cycle level and this may be due to a longer history and practice of integration, while at other levels it is a more recent situation.

Figure 2 – Knowledge of legislation



Our constitutional law of 1976 grants all citizens with the right to education. Since 1986, with the Comprehensive Law on the Education System (DL 46/86), other several laws have been published in order to improve educational quality in a basic school for all.

The knowledge of the legislation does not appear to be great, considering for instance that the law that comes quoted in third place is an important one (Desp. 105/97), since it actually changed the characteristics of school support system, traditionally centred on the child, aiming to focus this support at school level with the responsibility of all the teachers and school community.

However, one can see differences among the school levels. At pre-school the knowledge seems to be less than at the other levels (1st, 2nd, 3rd cycles - basic education) which is something rather natural if we compare the curricula objectives. There is greater flexibility of the pre-school curriculum (not compulsory), and less visible differences among children of these age groups, which on the other hand become more evident when academic skills are required and valued.

Table 4 - Educational Strategies (applied and valued)

	Pre		1st		2nd/3rd		EBM	
	Applied	Valued	Applied	Valued	Applied	Valued	Applied	Valued
Pedagogical Differentiation		8	27	11				
Support inside the class	13		22	10			6	
Support outside the class					10			
Clubs						3		
Interdisciplinary projects							6	3

One of the interesting things is that the educational measures schools undertook are not all seen as the most efficient. At pre-school the most applied is support inside the class and the most valued pedagogical differentiation, though they are not incompatible.

The 1st cycle applies more pedagogical differentiation and support inside the class, and values them as well, which indicates some coherence with the new trends in education. EBMs apply more support inside the class and interdisciplinary projects and find the latter the most efficient.

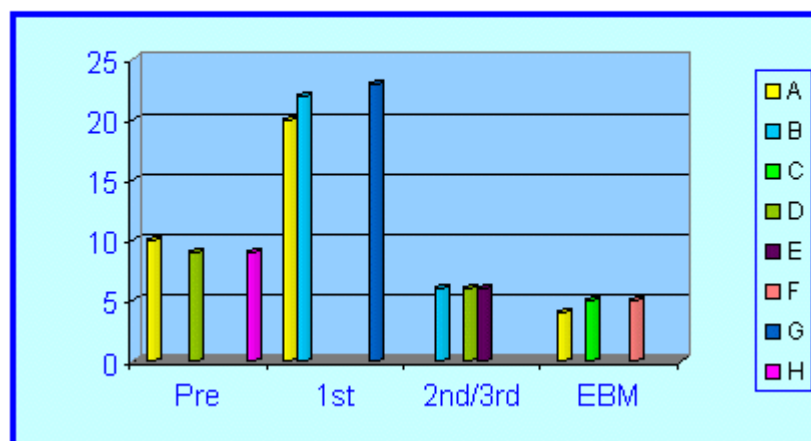
On the other hand, the 2nd and 3rd school level say they apply more the support outside the class, but see it as the least efficient. Curiously the less applied strategy, clubs is the most valued.

Considering clubs are extra-curricula activities, organised on a voluntary basis, the interest and motivation of teachers and pupils are guaranteed.

Once more the class strategies seem not to be questioned. Teachers still view support system as centred on the child and school board do not appear to have "enough strength" to change this perspective.

The reasons pointed out for the efficiency of the strategies chosen seem to be the respect for individuality, the adaptation to individual characteristics and particularities of the learning process.

Figure 3- Obstacles to Inclusion



- A - Inadequate equipment
- B - Insufficient human resources
- C - Difficulties in time organization
- D - Teacher mobility
- E - School - Family relationships
- F - Programmes' extension
- G - Insufficient material resources
- H - Inadequacy of spaces

As we can see by the results, the majority of schools of all levels consider the insufficiency and inadequacy of resources, either material or human, the most difficult obstacles to overcome.

EBMs mention the extension of school programmes and the organization of time.

As we can see, the attribution to external causes, therefore not dependent on school and educational community power, are those pointed out.

Table 5- Role and contribution of management

		Pre	1st	2nd/3rd	EBM
Facilitator/Dynamic Agent	Creation of conditions	40.0%	17.8%	25.0%	12.5%
	Leadership profile	16.0%	20.0%	25.0%	----
	Curricula organization	28.0%	4.4%	16.7%	----
	School organization	----	----	16.7%	62.5%
	Contribution to community awareness	8.0%	20.0%	8.3%	----
	Promotion of pupils participation	----	13.3%		12.5%
	Promotion of autonomy	----	17.8%		12.5%
	Social regulation and interpersonal links	----	6.7%		----
	Knowledge of the contexts	8.0%	----		----
	Diagnosis	----	----	8.3%	----
	Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Direction boards find their role an important one, as facilitators and dynamic agents in creating the right conditions to promote Inclusive School and give some relevance to their leadership profile, their capacity to guide and take decisions, which is undoubtedly a positive aspect.

It is interesting to note that only the 1st cycle appears to have a more open vision of their role to contribute for community awareness. This may be due to the fact of being the first formal teaching and traditionally the one which brings school closer to the community, specially in rural and isolated areas, where it is the only educational and cultural facility.

All the other school levels see their role linked more to school organization and in that way turned to the inside.

Partnership project with Teacher Training School

Most of the schools which answered the questionnaire showed interest in the project and face it as viable, considering it an important basis for teachers and school development.

Summary

The analysis made, the empirical knowledge of the schools contexts of the different levels, the recent school organizational model, which tends to aggregate schools from pre to 3rd cycle, led us to conclude that it would be probably more important to concentrate our action at 2nd and 3rd level schools.

4- School-Based Teacher Training: strategies for the inclusive schools

The process of data analysis led us inevitably to the dilemma of action. What we knew for sure was that our plan had to be focused on:

- two schools which answered the questionnaire and showed interest in the project;
- preferably two schools of different geographic contexts (e.g. rural vs urban; littoral vs inland), of different school level and different model of management.

Considering all the limitations, we finally decided to contact two schools of the town where we work, which have already established partnership with our school concerning our students' practice in the initial teacher training.

After explaining our intentions and after the discussion had in all the departments of those schools, there was a number of voluntary teachers in each school, which we found sufficient to start with. The only condition we made was that the group had to include a member of the management department, and so in March/2000 we began the meeting with one of the groups and in April with the other group.

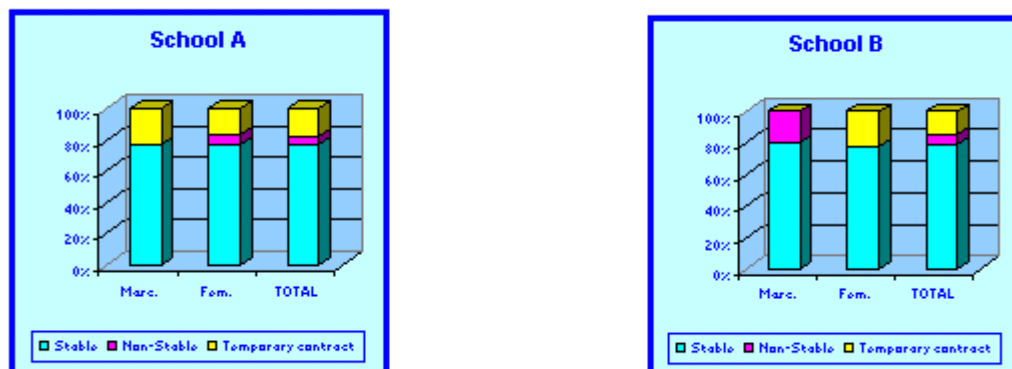
Table 6- Number of students and SEN students

	2nd cycle			3rd Cycle			Whole
Sex	Masc.	Fem.	Total	Masc.	Fem.	Total	
School							
A	111	92	203	165	154	319	522
	15 SEN*	4 SEN		7 SEN	8 SEN		34 SEN (6.5%)
B	190	152	342	281	266	547	889
	9 SEN	2 SEN		10 SEN	1 SEN		22 SEN (2.5%)

*SEN - Special Educational Needs

The causes attributed to the special educational needs are those focused by most of the schools. Only school B points out as another possible cause the lack of cooperative work among teachers.

Figure 4- Number of Teachers and Professional Situation



The percentage of teachers who are stable, in both schools, is quite good for the region's rate and does not differ much from each other. Both schools have 2 support teachers and in each, one is a specialized teacher. School A has also a psychologist on a permanent basis.

Politics of Inclusion

The concept of inclusion has also similarities since for both, it means a school for all, a school which is able to organize educational answers for all the students, preparing them for success and future life in society. When we compare the educational measures already developed, school A seems to have experienced a wider range and more diverse ones. The common features are guided study, support inside and outside the class; the different features are for A, pedagogical differentiation, peer- teaching, clubs, co-teaching and for B, the cooperative work between regular and support teacher.

The most efficient are for A, co-teaching, pedagogical differentiation and clubs, since they permit a respect for student's specific rhythm and interests. For B, the cooperative work is more valued.

School A considers the insufficient human resources, the great number of pupils per class and School-Family relationship as the most difficult obstacles to overcome, while for B, traditional pedagogical practices, teachers' mobility, inadequate teacher training, rejection attitudes and lack of team work are those focused.

Table 7 - Characterization of the two groups of teachers in the project

Teachers	Masc.	Fem.	Total	Disciplinary domains of teaching
School				
A	1	13	14	Languages (Portuguese/French), History, Mathematics, Science, Physical Education, Agriculture
B	3	7	10	Languages (Portuguese/English), Music, Mathematics, Science, Physical Education

We were conscious that it was a small group of teachers, not representative of all departments, but with some degree of heterogeneity in age, teaching experience and disciplinary domain. We were also aware that the results might be rather unsuccessful, but since we were determined to cause some impact on the schools through these volunteer teachers, we decided to risk.

The Training Process It was structured upon the following principles:

- Context based process, rooted in cooperation and needs analysis.
- Emphasis on a reflective methodology centred on the individual reality, as a process of acting both at classroom level and at organizational level.
- Focus on a training group which would gradually motivate and involve the school as a whole, multiplying strategies for change and innovation.

Goals

- Contribute to professional and organizational development as the basis for the Inclusive School Implementation.
- Develop innovative practices in schools through a reflective attitude, cooperation and mutual learning.
- Apply research methods to promote the quality of the educational practice and of the training process itself.

The problems identified in both schools were very similar and can be summarized as follows:

- Lack of cooperative work between teachers;
- Lack of motivation of the educational community (students, teachers, other staff) and its relation to: school failure, school increase in dropouts and disruptive behaviour;
- Lack of collaboration between School and Family.
- So, the challenge was enormous but very interesting to deal with, both for trainers and trainees. Since we were always in a position of learning together on a very equal basis we tried to build a climate of openness and confidence necessary for professional growth.

The programme was then developed session by session and started by focusing on cooperative work between teachers (school B) and students (school A) and ways of contributing to a culture and practice of collaboration in those schools, taking advantage of their inner resources and energy.

Strategies

- Individual reflection
- Sharing knowledge and experience
- Final systematization defining the field of action
- Institutional Involvement: >Inducing Participation > Giving Information and Feedback > Designing plans for application in individual context > teachers and pupils

Evaluation

- Continuous , following the process through the opinions about the work developed.
- Portfolio with the results of research and the materials produced.

The evaluation already undertook emphasises the methodologies that had been used, particularly: the opportunity for sharing information and application in a broader context outside the small training group.

The most interesting aspect of these sessions is the fact that they emerge from the result of the work teachers plan to do between sessions and end up by being moments of sharing and enrichment reflection.

We are facilitators of a process of analysis and reflection upon practice (either in classroom or in school) in order to create a dynamic environment which intended to give this small group of teachers support and confidence to assume leadership in their organization.

As critical friends we always emphasize the need to involve other members of the school (colleagues, students, parents, staff...) in the process of changes they find necessary to improve the quality of their practice. As outsiders, we try to open perspectives in the way of looking at the school phenomena, since when one is too linked to a certain reality, the clarity of vision can be disturbed .

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